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ABSTRACT

Informal assessment, the use of teacher designed instruments that are based on materials actually used in the content area classroom, is used to determine the student's potential for success with particular materials and the areas of potential difficulty in these materials. Informal assessment also helps to determine the need for supportive reading instruction and for possible supplemental testing. As they build an informal inventory, teachers should be aware of the interaction between the text and the reader in three main areas: (1) the text--teachers need to look at the features of various units the students read in the class, particularly those that affect comprehension and recall; (2) the task--teachers should consider the skill the reader employs in reading the text and its various units as well as the situation in which it occurs; and (3) the reader--the teacher needs to recognize that the reader uses some or all of a configuration of possible strategies in processing the information. (Appendixes include a description of the task condition, suggestions for assessing competency in understanding word meaning in a variety of ways, and alternatives for assessing the student's abilities in using the conventions used by the text author to make the topic and the organization of the material clear.) (HOD)

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# Informal Assessments of Students and Materials for the Content Teacher

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Informal assessment I define as the use of teacher-designed instruments which are based on materials actually used in the content classroom. These can be used to examine students skills in a particular classroom with the testing occurring in a variety of situations including before the students begin to use the text and during written tests and oral questioning with one or more students. Think of informal assessment as including not only paper and pencil tests, but also as a part of diagnostic teaching with testing going on all the time.

Informal assessment can be used by content area teachers to determine the student's potential for success with particular materials and areas of potential difficulty in these materials. It can also help determine the need for supportive reading instruction and for possible supplemental testing.

## OVERVIEW OF INFORMAL ASSESSMENT

We used to look at the student and his problems. Now we take a broader view and examine the interaction between the text and the reader. This can be broken down into three main areas of concern, areas you need to be aware of as you build an informal inventory.

## PROCEDURE FOR INFORMAL ASSESSMENT

It is important to analyze your materials and to decide on instructional priorities. Determine what is most and least important and what is needed tomorrow. Do not try to do everything at once. You will overwhelm the

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students and will not get any content teaching done.

Develop a repertoire of testing strategies. Continue to use standard IRI, a passage with questions of different levels at the end. Cloze is particularly good for assessing comprehension of textbooks. In addition develop new strategies, such as the one included here.

To start with, pick a few short paragraphs or one of two longer passages from material you are going to use soon. Do this at the beginning of a semester and or the beginning of a new book, or during instruction when you sense students are having difficulty. You might have both written and oral responses. Do not worry if you have to read the questions to the students. Think of your inventory as a basic checklist. You are not concerned with every aspect of it nor are you a remedial reading teacher charged with checking off skills inventory. You are charged with enabling the student to grow in your content area. To do this, you need to enable him to read your materials and hopfully become a better reader.

(Insert Exhibit 1)

1. THE TEXT

You need to look at the various units the students read in your class and their characteristics -- or features.

> The field of discourse analysis suggests that the textural features, particularly the semantic features effect comprehension and recall. We understand written material because there are some cues and guidelines in the material that tell us why certain information is included and how information is related. We use these standard cues to decode and comprehend.

Examine Exhibit 1. The text features included here are concerned with comprehension. Because the focus of this talk is on content teachers and not remedial reading teachers, discussion and examples will be limited to comprehension. However, you can apply the remarks to decoding.

a. Consider the variety of units that go into comprehension. When you develop your inventory, look at these units and features. Determine which ones, or probably all, are ones that are relevant to your students. Now, you've made the first decision in developing your inventory.

b. Next, examine your materials to determine the features that appear important for your students to use in comprehending the message. Exhibit 1 details some of these.

2. THE TASK There are two aspects we need to consider here:

1. the Skill this reader employs in reading the text and the various units in the text.

These are the reading and study skills teachers and reading programs have long used in teaching reading.

We can teach these skills.

Students can master them.

We can test for mastery--we can measure and quantify the results of the test.

2. the situation in which it occurs.

We ask students to demonstrate these skills in various situations-- we ask them to perform the task under a variety of conditions. Thus, the other part of the task that is of concern in building an informal inventory is that of the Task Condition (see exhibit 1).

3. THE READER Now, consider the reader.

He brings a certain background knowledge for the reading situation (his schema, if you will).

He uses some or all of a configuration of possible strategies in processing the information--the kinds of strategies discussed in the field of learning theory.

Summary

In determining what you need to know about your students, draw on these three areas as sources of information for how your student/students will interact with the text in order to read and comprehend the content in your subject area.

## EXAMPLES OF INFORMAL ASSESSMENTS

To get an idea of options available for testing, consider some specific applications. Remember, you are not going to do everything at once.

The first two samples below are based on a passage from a 9th grade social studies text (Exhibit 2), This is America's Story by Wilder, Ludlim and Brown. Houghton Mifflin, 1968.

1. The first unit we will consider is three related paragraphs. (Exhibit 3) The critical feature here is the importance to the reader of the topic or concept. By the 9th grade students have had some exposure to topics. You need to find out if they have background knowledge, if they can recall it, if they can use what they know to predict content and if they can generate questions about content based on what they already know.
2. Words are important units with a variety of features including whether the meaning is explicit, whether it relates to topic/concept and whether it may be variable depending on context. See Exhibit 4 for suggestions for assessing competency in understanding word meaning in a variety of ways.
3. The last example is a chapter from Exploring the Non-Western Word by Schwarts and O'Connor, Globe, 1976, (Exhibit 5). Here the writer has used certain conventions to make the topic and the organization of the material clear. Exhibit 6 presents alternatives for assessing the student's abilities in using these conventions.

## CONCLUSION

You're not going to design a finely honed, totally reliable and valid diagnostic instrument. Rather, your purpose is developing an informal assessment of your students and your texts and the interaction between them is to begin the process of helping them read and comprehend the necessary written materials. Hopefully, you will also be making contributions to their overall growth as readers.

| THE TEXT<br>Units and their Features<br>(aid in transmission of meaning from author to reader-bottom up) | EXHIBIT 1 | THE TASK<br>Skills performed under various Task Conditions<br>Skills The reader may: |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Topic or Concept can be:<br>stated/unstated<br>familiar/unfamiliar<br>interesting/uninteresting<br>used to provide framework for information and ideas | | Identify topic/concept<br>Relate part to whole<br>Use whole to comprehend and interpret part |
| 2. Words have meaning which may be:<br>related to topic/concept<br>explicit/implicit<br>variable depending on context<br>determined by morphemes | | Read word (as sight word or decode)<br>Hypothesize word from context<br>Assign appropriate meaning from: memory, morphemes, category of meaning, context |
| 3. Sentences have meaning which is:<br>related to topic/concept<br>related to function<br>explicit/implicit<br>determined from syntax and semantics<br>obtained from the whole as well as the parts | | Recognize key words, order and relationship of parts<br>Assign meaning to words and groups of words<br>Identify topic/concept<br>Comprehend sentence |
| 4. Connected Discourse<br>(paragraphs, chapters, books)<br>meaning can be<br>related to topic/concept<br>explicit/implicit<br>determined by aid of organizational features such as:<br>structure(main ideas, details)<br>function (introduction, transition, etc.)<br>semantic (definition, example, sequence, comparison/contrast, problem/solution cause/effect) | | Read words and sentences emphasizing critical one<br>Use, comprehend (on various levels), evaluate, and apply information and features of text<br>Adjust reading strategy for text and purpose |
| 5. Format (fiction, poetry, biography essay, etc.)<br>provides cues for content and meaning | | Utilize features of format to identify, categorize and organize information and concepts |
| 6. Additions to text<br>(graphs, tables, index, etc.)<br>provide additional and different sources of meaning | | Use appropriate skill determine meaning<br>Apply meaning to body of text to support/extend text meaning |

Task Conditions

The reader may be required to:

Recognize information as something seen before

Locate the information and concepts

Identify the information or concept from a number of alternatives

Recall with aid information or concepts prompted by an open-ended question or statement

Recall without aid. Summarize or paraphrase information

THE READER

Strategies

(used by the reader to determine the author's meaning top down)

The reader may:

Possess and Recall previous appropriate knowledge

Relate it to unit and information

Make predictions about unit and information based on previous knowledge

Generate questions about the topic and the text

Categorize units and information to compare and contrast

Organize information

Evaluate accuracy, appropriateness and sufficiency of information

Relate new information to other new information and concepts

Revise skills, strategies and knowledge based on new information and outcomes

EXHIBIT 2

Our new government has three branches. So far we have been speaking of the government in general terms. "The government," we have said, can do this. It cannot do that." Actually, the United States government is organized into three separate parts, or branches (chart, page 232). Each branch has its own special duties. One branch makes the laws. This is the legislative branch, or Congress, and consists of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The second branch puts the laws into effect and sees that they are obeyed. This is the executive branch and is headed by the President. The third branch decides cases growing out of the breaking of laws, and also decides whether the laws themselves violate the Constitution. This is the judicial branch. It consists of the Supreme Court and the less important federal courts. To divide the government in this way into separate branches, each with its own powers, is called separation of powers.

2. Why are powers separated? Why did the members of the Constitutional Convention divide the government so carefully into three separate branches? The reason is that they wanted to prevent tyranny, that is, cruel or unjust use of power. They believed that if wide powers are given to a single man or a few men, they are likely to be misused. For example, a policeman might easily become a tyrant if he could make the rules and then arrest and punish anybody whom he accused of breaking the rules. But if one man makes the rules, if a second man arrests the people who he believes have broken the rules, and if still a third man decides whether the arrested people really have broken the rules, there is less chance for mistakes or tyranny.

3. Each branch has power to check the others. Even though they had divided the government into three branches, the members of the Constitutional Convention were not sure they had gone far enough. One branch of the government still might do the wrong thing. To prevent this, the Constitution provides that one branch may check another. For example, if Congress passes an unwise law, the President may disapprove or veto it. This prevents Congress from becoming too strong. Or if Congress dislikes a man chosen by the President to help him enforce the laws, the Senate may refuse to approve his appointment. The President will then have to select someone else. Also, the Supreme Court may check Congress and the President by deciding the meaning of a law in case of a dispute. It can even declare a law unconstitutional (contrary to the Constitution) so that it is no longer a law. There are other ways in which one branch of the government may check the others. This way of limiting power is called a system of checks and balances. The Constitutional Convention believed that the system would make it difficult for any one branch to become too powerful.

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Taken from: Wilder, Ludlum, and Brown, This is America's Story Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968 pp. 231-232.

EXHIBIT 3

Analysis of
TEXT
TASK
READER

TEXT - Unit: Three related paragraphs

1. TEXT - Feature: Topic/concept provides framework

TASK - Skill: Relate parts/whole
Condition: Unaided recall

or Identify

READER - Recall
Predict
Generate Questions

2. TEXT - Feature: Topic/concept provides framework
TASK - Skill: Relate part/whole
Condition: Recognize

or Locate

READER - Categorize
Evaluate
Revise

Student Questions

You are going to read a passage about the powers of the three branches of our government

Write down the questions you think will be answered in the passage.

Put a check next to the questions you think will be answered in the passage

1. What are three branches of government?
2. How are their powers different?
3. How do people get jobs in the three branches?
4. Where are the branches located?

Now that you have read the passage, check your questions. What questions were not answered?
Now look back at the paragraphs. What questions will you add ?

Answer your questions

EXHIBIT 4

TEXT - Unit: Word

Tyranny

1. Feature: Meaning explicit

TASK - Skill: Read word
Assign meaning from memory

Condition: Unaided recall

Define the word tyranny
Choose one answer:
Tyranny means:
1. violent storm
2. harsh, absolute use of powe
3. fatal disease

or Identify

READER - Recall appropriate information

2. TEXT - Feature: Meaning related to topic/concept

TASK - Skill: Assign meaning from category of meaning

Condition: Unaided recall

You will read a paragraph about th separation of power in American government. Why would the word tyranny be used in that paragraph?
Choose one answer:
The word tyranny is in a paragra about the separation of power in American government becau
1. A ruler in the U.S. can use tyranny to keep powers in the branches separate.
2. The branches of government have separate powers to prevent tyranny.
3. Tyranny is part of our form of government.

or Identify

READER - Recall
Relate
Predict

3. TEXT - Feature: meaning may be variable depending on context

TASK - Skill: Assign meaning from context

The reason is that they wanted to prevent tyranny, that is, cruel or unjust use of power.

Condition: Aided recall

Read the second sentence. Now define the word tyranny in your own words

or Identify

Read the second sentence. Now choose an answer that means the same thing as tyranny in this sentence.

1. harsh use of power
2. wide-spread use of power
3. just use of power

or Locate

Read the sentence again. Underline the words that tell you what tyranny means.

READER - categorize

4. TEXT - Feature: meaning may be variable depending on context

TASK: Skill: use key word to identify definition

Condition: Unaided recall

How did you know the author was giving you a definition for tyrann

or Aided recall

What words in the third sentence told you that the author was going to define the word tyranny for you?

or Identify

Choose one: What words in the sentence told you that the author was going to define the word tyranny for you?

1. the reason
2. to prevent
3. that is

or Locate

Read the sentence again. Underline the words that tell you the author is defining the word tyranny for you.

READER - Recall

5. TEXT - Feature: meaning may be variable depending on context

   TASK - Skill: assign meaning from context
   Condition: Recognize

   READER - Categorize
   Evaluate
   Revise

Now, look at your answer to the first question. Would you change it or leave it?

6. TEXT - Feature: meaning may be variable depending on context

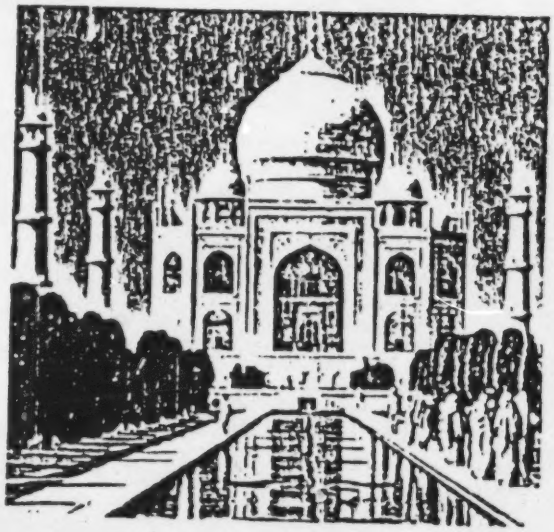
   TASK - Skill: design meaning from context
   Condition: Aided recall

   READER - Recall
   Categorize
   Evaluate
   Relate
   Revise

Finish reading the paragraph. Does your definition of tyranny stay the same or would you change it? If so, give a new definition.

CHAPTER 2

# The India That Was



PROBLEM: How did the Indian people live under their different rulers?

READING FOR A PURPOSE:

1. How was India first settled?
2. How did the Mongols change India?
3. What changes did the British make?

1. Mankind is just beginning to learn more about a civilization in India as old as that of China. A dark-skinned people had settled in the river valleys of the northern plain about 2,000 years before the time of Christ. Their land was invaded by wandering herders from the northwest. These nomads were a light-skinned people called Aryans (from the language they spoke). The Aryans pushed the earlier settlers slowly toward the south. Then they gave up their herding of sheep and became farmers. They divided the land into small kingdoms, each ruled by a prince who was called a rajah. They developed the idea of caste. (Scholars have learned about the history of the Aryans by reading their holy writings called *Vedas*.)

2. About 500 B. C., a prince named Siddhartha was born. His father was ruler of a small kingdom in the Himalayas. The prince was very rich, but despite his riches he was not happy. He gave up his riches and began a search to learn about the meaning of life. The prince discovered that life was full of pain. He found that people made themselves unhappy because they wanted things they could not have. He believed that if a man could put an end to his selfish desires, he would be happier and the world would be better. He taught what he believed to others. His followers gave him a new name, Buddha, which means the "wise one." His followers were called Buddhists. (Today, there are many followers of Buddha's ideas who also think of themselves as Hindus.)

In 327 B. C., Alexander the Great of Greece reached India. But his stay long. Shortly after his invasion, the ruler of a small state in northern India began to conquer to neighboring states. He and his family were called Mauras. By 300 B. C. they ruled the entire Ganges plain and the valley of the Indus as well. This was the first time that a single ruler had conquered and governed so much of India. The greatest Maura[illegible] was Asoka. Asoka was a Buddhist. He sent missionaries throughout India and the neighboring lands to spread the ideas of

*This festival recalls the times when the maharajahs or princes ruled the land.*

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EXHIBIT 6

TEXT - UNIT: CHAPTER

1. TEXT - Feature: meaning related to topic/concept
   TASK-Skill: Identify topic from title and the initial statement
   Condition: Unaided recall
   Aided recall

   Look at the beginning of this chapter quickly. What is the chapter going to be about?

   Read the title and the first sentence. What is this chapter going to be about?

   or Identify

   Read the title and the first sentence.

   Choose one: The chapter is going to be about:
   1. the buildings of India
   2. the history of India
   3. the holidays of India

   READER - Recall
   Relate
   Predict

2. TEXT - Feature: meaning related to topic/concept

   TASK - Skill: Identify topic from key words

   Condition: Unaided recall

   How did you know what the topic was going to be?

   or Aided recall

   What were key words in the title and the first sentence that told you what the topic was going to be?

   or Identify

   Choose three: The key words that helped you decide that the topic of the chapter was going to be a history of India were:
   1. India
   2. mankind
   3. was
   4. that
   5. learn
   6. old

3. TEXT - Feature: Semantic organizational features aid meaning

TASK - Skill: utilize key words to identify sequence of events

Condition: Unaided recall — Look over the chapter quickly. Write down everything that helped you follow the author's ideas about the sequence of events in the history of India.

or - Aided recall — Look over the chapter quickly. What were the key words the author used to help you understand that you were reading about the history of India over the years.

or - Locate — Look over the chapter quickly. Underline the signals in the chapter that helped you understand that you were reading about the history of India over the years.

READER - Recall
Relate
Categorize